

John G. Sommer. *Empowering the Oppressed: Grassroots Advocacy Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001. 207 pages. Paperback. Price not given.

Advocacy movements all over the world have been quite instrumental in bringing about social change. The efforts of groups involved in such movements are directed towards realising the core human values of justice and equality by securing the human and civil rights of the poor, oppressed, and marginalised sections of society. Lately, many groups have realised that merely obliterating the effects of oppression, discrimination, and injustice is not enough—these efforts must be supplemented by attempts to address their root causes as well. Only by doing so, the constructive changes occurring in society owing to the struggle of these movements can become sustainable.

As a consequence of this realisation, the approach of these grassroots advocacy movements has also witnessed a shift. Given the inadequacy of the ‘traditional’ approach to development, focusing more on specific projects of relief work and humanitarian aid, and attempting to achieve tangible targets, an altogether new and different approach is increasingly being employed. The ‘empowerment’ approach to development seeks to alter and realign the power relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed sections of society by pursuing the political empowerment of the latter. The successful combination of the two approaches in a number of advocacy movements in India forms the central theme of the book under review.

The problem identified by the author is that despite efforts to alleviate poverty at governmental and non-governmental levels, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening day by day. Furthermore, discrimination on the basis of caste, class, or gender has not decreased substantially. The key to it lies in challenging the very basis of discrimination, and addressing ‘structural’ oppression and violence.

The book comprises nine chapters presenting case studies of various grassroots advocacy movements, highlighting the vision, efforts, activities, and strategies of their founders/leaders. Seemingly, these chapters expose diverse themes rooted in the varied experiences of these movements. Nevertheless, one finds a common thread running through these chapters—how efforts can be made to alter the unequal power relationships in society. Moreover, one of the chapters unfolds the story of a donor organisation, and provides insights from its unique ‘foreign aid’ approach.

Chapter One, titled “Of Pigs and Goats and Human Bondage”, narrates the story of Vivek and Vidyullata Pandit, who had initiated a number of education and health-related development projects in rural Maharashtra. A year later, a ‘rude awakening’, radically altering their worldview, brought home the life, problems, and reality of bonded labourers. They learned that “understanding powerlessness is the

greatest challenge for organisers. Power relations may be so diffused as to defy immediate identification or quick solutions". (p. 22). Unlike the traditional approach of other NGOs working for the freedom of these labourers, the Pandits sought to realign the power relationships by tilting the balance of power in favour of these labourers. Using a rights-based approach, they organised the labourers, including the tribals and dalits (*outcastes*), and motivated them to demand their rights to education and health, etc. They also helped many in getting freed. Moreover, they also established a rural development trust and its allied union in order to change the mindset of these freed people.

The second chapter, "Reclaiming Human Personality", tells the story of the struggle for the dalits' rights by Martin Macwan, who founded Navsarjan in Gujarat. Navsarjan has been described as the first self-consciously dalit organisation of the country. Being a membership organisation, it takes as members only those who pass a specific test: those who wish to be its members must accept a glass of water from a dalit (p. 48). It amply verifies their rejection of caste discrimination and untouchability. Macwan has learned from experience that the atrocities and oppression cannot be understood as individual cases; rather they are the product of a social system based on discrimination and injustice. This structured oppression can only be addressed by collective action. Consciousness being the key to mobilisation, Navsarjan raises consciousness among the dalits. In addition, it also provides basic social services like health and education to them.

Despite the fact that women contribute nearly 63 percent of the GDP in India, the female labour force remains vulnerable and unprotected (p. 57). These insecurities compelled the working women to organise themselves, and form a labour union named SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association)—probably the best known NGO of the country. Presently, SEWA has an international outreach, and has sister organisations in South Africa, Turkey, and Yemen. The third chapter, "Trunks of the Banyan: In Support of Women", recounts how SEWA was founded, and sheds light on its goals, activities, and major successes. Founded by Ela Bhatt, it seeks to empower the women by a two-pronged strategy: through labour union struggle and encouraging income-generating activities. Employing a rights-based approach, SEWA has approached the judiciary to ensure women's right to livelihood. Without overtly confronting the government, it has successfully lobbied with the local authorities on a number of crucial issues. It has also established its own bank, and initiated a micro-credit scheme for poor women. Moreover, it provides health and other services to them as well. In this way, SEWA has integrated the traditional development approach of relief work with the new empowerment approach aimed at changing power relationships at societal level.

Another grassroots advocacy movement leader is Chennaiah, who was born in a family of illiterate and landless labourers in South India. Now he is Secretary General of a federation of trade unions called APVVU. It works for the agricultural

workers, marginal farmers, and dalits in Andhra Pradesh. Besides releasing bonded labourers from the shackles of slavery, it seeks to empower agricultural workers by advocating land reforms and distribution of land among the landless, which forms the basis of the next chapter, "Struggle in the South: Land to the Landless". For undertaking such efforts, the knowledge of local land records, ownership patterns, and land ceilings is as crucial as the knowledge of local landlords and politicians, who monopolise the land. After equipping themselves with this knowledge, they educated the agricultural workers on the land laws. Cases of illegal land transfers to influential landlords were publicised, and the courts were approached after taking a collective decision. Eventually, the landless poor succeeded in getting land titles.

In addition to the knowledge of the exploitative and structured power relations in a given society, the know-how of the financial issues, particularly the financial management of the state, may also lead to a kind of empowerment of the powerless and disadvantaged people. One way to achieve this is through budget analysis and advocacy, ingeniously devised by Mistry, the founder of Developing Initiatives for Social and Human Action (DISHA). This forms the focus of the fifth chapter, "Power of Knowledge, Power of Purse". Mistry realised that "*merely organising* them is not sufficient. The leadership of the poor also needs to educate itself in the science of economics". (p. 82).

Beside these empowerment movements, there are other grassroots advocacy movements in India having different approaches towards understanding and solving the problems of the people. The next chapter, "Variations on the Theme", presents the case studies of two such movements. Established by social worker Joshi, CECOEDECON (Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants) is a typical development NGO. It is neither a rights-based organisation nor heading an empowerment movement. Its leaders have deliberately avoided adopting the empowerment approach; instead they lend advocacy support to local groups in Rajasthan. Similarly, Dr Lakdawala's organisation, Sanchetana, works on a number of social problems including those related to communal issues in Ahmedabad (Gujarat).

The role of donors and donor organisations is central to all initiatives aiming at the empowerment of the poor and the marginalised. In its eighth chapter, "Implications for Donors", the author presents the case of a small but effective development organisation, the Holdeen India Programme (HIP) of the Unitarian-Universalist Church. The experiences and observations of its director, Kathy Sreedhar, are also recounted. She observed, for instance, that since in India there is no broad-based concept of community owing to divisions of caste, class, religion, and ethnicity, the Western concept of 'community-based organisation' is not relevant there (p. 123). Moreover, she realised that the upper class and better-off people support the cause of poverty alleviation as long as it does not challenge the basic structures perpetuating poverty and inequality in the society, since their privileges and benefits are tied to these very structures.

She also observed that conventional development approaches, which are more focused on projects, have a number of limitations and inadequacies. NGOs have to design projects according to the needs of the donors, not according to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged. Such projects generally do not address the causes of oppression, poverty, and inequality, and that is why they fail to challenge power relationships in a society. HIP works in partnership with struggle-based NGOs of India. It facilitates the *process* of empowerment rather than supporting specific *projects*. Employing a bottom-up approach, it assists various empowerment movements working at the grass-roots level. Given its unique approach, it does not see its partners as 'recipients' or 'beneficiaries' as generally done by donors. Instead, it encourages peer, collegial relationships with them.

The last chapter of the book offers concluding thoughts. Given the unsustainability of the activities and short-term targets, the author concludes that some of the welfare-oriented development organisations have realised that their initiatives cannot become sustainable without challenging and altering the existing power relationships in the society. Therefore, they have sought to integrate the conventional project-oriented development approach with the rights-based empowerment approach. Hitherto, the two approaches were considered mutually exclusive, and organisations adhering to them distrusted each other. Development organisations employing the former approach were branded as *pro-status quo*, whereas the empowerment movements following the latter approach were deemed essentially 'political', having a confrontational relationship with the state. The two approaches, now being integrated by many groups, though quite rarely, are mutually reinforcing. Political action is now being defined by them as a struggle to gain access to resources and lawful rights.

Sommer locates the reasons for the uncommon integration of the two approaches by organisations and groups. First, an empowerment or political action-oriented movement requires courageous, dynamic, and charismatic leadership, willing to delegate power to local group leaders; secondly, the movement must constantly expand its social base and create a critical mass; thirdly, it needs to undertake capacity-building and training measures for its members; fourthly, self-sustaining empowerment takes a lot of time, requiring patience, long-term planning, and realistic time-frames for achieving objectives; and lastly, resources like funds, experience, ideas, a sense of solidarity, and networking are crucial for any empowerment movement. Impediments to empowerment include, *inter alia*, resistance from the élite or vested interests in a society, as well as the complex institutional and bureaucratic regulations, which obstruct the efforts to social change through empowering the oppressed and the marginalised groups.

Turning to the international donors, the author sums up their strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, they have access to resources, capacity to generate international publicity, and lend international support, as well as immunity to the

cause of local vested interests; but on the other hand, they are less familiar with local cultures of a place, which mars a true understanding of social realities and conditions. Sommer points out that at times projects dealing with humanitarian development strengthen the *status quo* of power relationships in society. Moreover, many donors expect their recipient organisations to achieve tangible and verifiable targets, but in such empowerment movements, success of initiatives cannot easily be measured in objective terms. Such observations underpin the need to reorientate and educate the donor organisations as well as their constituencies, from where they generate funds. There is a need to develop reciprocal learning and a mutually reinforcing relationship between the donors and the NGOs, so that both can enrich and enlighten each other.

The concluding chapter is followed by appendices. Appendix 1 offers organisational profiles of some fourteen organisations mentioned in various chapters of the book, outlining their leaders, purpose, overall approach and strategy, major programmes and their type, some details about their governance and decision-making, scope of work, capacity- and institution-building activities, significant institutional linkages, sources of support, and contact details. Appendix 2 provides details of participant groups in a 'Lessons Learned' Meeting. These appendices multiply the usefulness of the work. As for the methodology, the author has extensively drawn on the techniques of interviewing. Extracts from the speeches or works of the leaders of the empowerment movements have also been cited at places.

This book is a worthy addition to the literature dealing with civil society initiatives and non-government organisations, as well as social movements struggling to promote justice and eradicate oppression and discrimination. Not only those directly associated with development organisations and agencies will find it exciting; it will be of great interest to ordinary readers as well. Moreover, the book provides considerable inspiration to individuals and groups involved in similar activities of empowerment.

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